

A Study Comparing the Educational Support for Students

Experiencing Learning Disabilities in Australia and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Learning Disabilities also referred to as (LDs) are very common despite their variations in preference estimates, which are highly dependent on the definition and the nature of the applied diagnostic approach. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of the educational support systems for people with learning disabilities in Australia and Saudi Arabia. Apparently, it can be heart wrecking trying to address the challenges presented by people with LDs. This is especially considering that LDs are life-long problems that can neither be treated nor fixed. Fortunately, with the right interventions and support systems, children with the learning disabilities have the potential to succeed in school and after school lives. Considering that Australia and Saudi Arabia are at different stages of development, the support systems may be varied as well. Although there are different support systems, this paper has primarily focused on three supportive approaches that are applicable in the two countries. Firstly, it has looked at the supportive rules, Acts, and policies. Secondly, the study has also undertaken a comparative analysis of the supportive education systems and teachers in the two countries. Finally, there is a discussion of the supportive government funding.

Key Words: Learning Disabilities, Australia, Education, Saudi Arabia, Comparative Study.

1. Introduction

Australia is a developed country having obtained its sovereignty in 1788 (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). As per the World Bank's 2013 data, the country had a population of 23.13 million people in 2013 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). Australia has a well-established compulsory education and the recent data by the Organization for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranked Australia at position 6 out of 65 countries in regard to the literacy levels (Thomas & Whitten, 2012). Importantly, however, to note is that the educational performance in the country is not universally distributed with students coming from the low socio-economic backgrounds being marginalized. Based on the recent statics, the number of the students suffering from LDs constitute of between 10 and 16 percent, which is a relatively large number requiring support? On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is a developing country that acquired self-rule in 1932 (Battal 884). For a relatively long time, no efforts were made in the country regarding children with disabilities including LD and hence ended up being absorbed into their families. The situation has changed over time with the introduction of special education in 1958 in the country (Alquraini, 2011). Specifically, the special education for children suffering from LDs in Saudi Arabia was officially introduced in 1996. Currently, the percentage of those children with LDs stand at 33% and it accounts for the second category of students in need of special education (Battal884).

2. Understanding Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities refers to the different neurological conditions that impede the ability of an individual to store, process, or manufacture information. However, there should not be confusion between learning disorders and learning problems, whereby the latter refers to the resultant effects of motor, hearing or visual handicaps, mental retardation; emotional disturbance; or the cultural, economic, or environmental disadvantages. In fact, previous studies have ruled out any link between LDs and intelligence or motivation. They have gone further to establish that students suffering from LD may perform or outperform their peers (Thomas & Whitten, 2012). The only challenge is that those with LD may have trouble reasoning, writing, spelling, reading, recalling or organizing information especially in the case where they are taught using the conventional methods or in instances where they are left alone to figure out things by themselves (Alquraini, 2011). Simply put, their brains are wired differently in the way they receive and process information. The most common Learning disabilities include nonverbal learning disabilities, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, and Dyslexia among others. However, it is important to note that learning According to (Westwood, 2012), the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) of Australia in 1990, defines LDs as:

.....the reserved umbrella of terms used in the description of children and youngsters exhibiting developmental and academic problems that are far significantly below the expected performance for their age and general abilities. Consequently, the learning disabilities are considered intrinsic in nature and hence not the effect intellectual disorder, emotional disturbance, or sensory and physical impairment. As such, learning disabilities are different from learning difficulties that are the resultant

effects of factors related to the intellectual disorders, emotional disturbance, or sensory and physical impairment.

According to Rasheed (2010), the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education Regulation of Special Education Institutions and Programs in (2002), defined LDs as:

Disorders in one or a multiple of fundamental mental processes that are involved in the comprehension of using spoken and written languages whose manifestation is apparent in listening, reading, thinking, spelling, writing or arithmetic related disorders and these issues are not as a result of issues related to familial, mental retardation, educational, social, and hearing or visual impairments related factors (Rasheed, 2010).

3. Current Situation

According to Wheldall (2006), the learning process is not an easy task and it is more challenging for those students suffering from the learning disabilities. In most cases, it will be a heart breaking experience for those parents who are confronted with the reality that their child is suffering from a learning disability (Wheldall, 2006). Just like in the case with other forms of disorders, students with learning disabilities are vulnerable and largely exposed to discrimination from their peers and in some cases the largely society. It is in this context that “inclusion” is an important concept. It means that all people regardless of their circumstances, behaviors, backgrounds, gender or age should be treated with the same dignity and value (Pearce, 2006). Unfortunately this is not the case and disability has been one factor through which people have been discriminated against. Besides being prejudiced in their family setups, children with disabilities experience a lot of discrimination in the external social system including in the schools. However, education is considered a basic necessity in many countries

where every child regardless of his or her circumstances should go through the system. According to Pearce (2009), this necessitates the existence of all-inclusive schools that embodies the spirit of equity and fairness among all the children and students. There are many factors that define inclusivity but this paper has mainly focused on the support of children with learning disabilities as one of such factors.

4. Supportive Rules, Acts, and Policies

Australia has put in place appropriate policies in ensuring educational equity and quality (Johnston, 2013). These policies are targeted at different student populations coming from diverse backgrounds and with diverse needs. Based on the recent statics by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013), Australia has performed relatively well in regard to inclusion policies. Johnston (2013), notes that the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of 1992 was primary formulated with the goal of ensuring that those kids and students experiencing learning disabilities have equal access to and participation in the curriculum just like their peers. According to DDA any person victimizing another on the basis of an underlying disability is subject to legal charges. This largely insulates the learners with LDs from discrimination that may be inflicted on them by the teachers.

There is also the Disability Standards for Education (DDE) 2005 that has helped in providing more clarity regarding the education service primarily on the issue of learning disability and its relation with the schools and learning institutions. Schools and institutions are required to ensure that all the student, including those with learning disabilities, have equal access to the same education resources as their counterparts. The aim is to ensure clarify so that learners with learning disabilities are insulated from any form of bias with regard to their educational rights (Johnston, 2013). Compared to Saudi Arabia, Australia ranks in front in

regard to supporting education for students with learning disabilities and hence relatively fewer policies.

However, Saudi Arabia has not been left in setting out policies that help promote education for those with learning disabilities. Over the past few decades, the Saudi Arabian government has been very conscious about the necessary improvements required in the education sector (Alquraini, 2011). In 1995, the Saudi Arabian government pioneered and ensured the creation of the Department of Learning Disabilities (DLD). The Education Ministry of Saudi Arabia, through its General Secretariat of Special Education (GSSE) pioneered and ensured the establishment of the Department of Learning Disabilities (DLD) in 1995 (Alquraini, 2011). During the time, the Education Ministry sponsored several pilot projects whereby special education trained teachers were to identify and teach learners with LDs through the application of special instruction. The Department of Learning Disabilities was later formally adopted by the policy makers in Saudi Arabia requiring that students with special needs to access special education services and this has not been scrapped off to this date.

Later in 2001, the Saudi Arabian government was proactive in the formation of the Rules and Regulations of Special Education Programs (RRSEP). According to Aldabas (2015), the aim of these rules was the establishment of the policies and privileges, which would ensure that those students with LD had free access to special-education programs. This has been maintained to the present day where the students suffering from the LDs have been protected against discrimination on the grounds of their prevailing circumstances (Aldabas, 2015). Eventually, this has enhanced the inclusion concept.

Additionally, the government has, through the ministry of education, put in place diverse programs aimed at helping the students with learning disabilities. There has been the

formation of the Saudi Learning Disabilities Program (SLDP), primary focusing on helping those children and students with learning disorders in the country (Alnaim, 2015). In 2006, the SLDP was established in 498 and 728 girls and boys primary schools respectively.

According to Alamri (2014), the number of male students enrolled to special needs schools had reached 30618 by

2008 and were benefiting from 2096 special education programs. On the other hand, the number of female students receiving special education had clocked 14504 for the period between 2010 and 2011 with the number of special education programs reaching 1428. By 2012, the

Department for Learning Disabilities (DLD) affirmed that the number of boys' schools that adopted the SLDP had reached 1285 schools (Alnaim, 2015).

The government has continued to increase the number of special schools where the students with learning disorders receive special education. This is in parallel to those special education classes set in the regular schools. In the special schools, the students with LDs are receiving Individual Education Programs (IEPs), which have a slight modification relative to the special education curriculum (Alquraini, 2011).

5. Supportive Education System and Teachers

The Australian government, through the ministry of education, places a lot of value on education where it has put in place strong policies and regulations to govern the already existing and stable education system in the country. Education is considered a basic necessity and hence compulsory for every person in the country. So as to ensure that learners with LDs as well as those in with other special needs are not discriminated against, the Ministry of education in all the Australian territories and states are mandated with the role of directly administering the

government schools. Its success in supporting education among students with LDs has been achieved due to various factors.

According to Campbell and Proctor (2014), the education system in Australia constitute of two main education systems. There is the regular schooling, which is mainly meant for those students without any disability that may compromise their learning processes. However, this category incorporates special schooling programs, which involve the incorporation of “special” classes for students with inimitable needs. Secondly, there are the special needs schools that are mainly attended by those students with special needs including those experiencing learning disabilities. Australia has existing terms that guide the teaching process so that the teachers help students with learning disabilities achieve their maximum potential (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). Equal value has been placed for both the regular and special education. Special education classes in Australia were established in the regular schools back in the 1930s and the existence of the special schools has been there for slightly more than 3 decades.

The Australian teaching system for students with LDs has been moving away from the resource/remedial teacher (RT) into the model of Learning support teacher (LST). The LSTs are expected to have a one-on-one contact with individual students rather than treating the students as a team. This extend to the Support Teacher, Learning Disabilities (STLD) model whereby the teachers are supposed to offer consultative and advisory services to different schools regarding the required standards in such schools so as to meet the learning needs of those students experiencing learning difficulties (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). These schools include both the ones adopting the regular teaching model and incorporating the special teaching education as well as the one that purely pursue the special education model. Consequently, this has continued to advance the learning environment of the students experiencing LDs.

In regard to Saudi Arabia, there have been relatively many developments that have been made over the last few decades with the goal of enhancing the quality of the overall educational output. For instance, after 2000, there was an increase in the number of programs with the aim of expanding the number of students experiencing special needs including among other those with language disorders, hearing impairments, and intellectual disabilities (Alamri, 2014). The Saudi Arabian schools have identified the need of providing high quality educational services to students suffering from LD in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This has given all the students an equal recognition to ensure that no one feels discriminated against thereby increasing their morale. Teachers have been in the front line advocating for the implementation of effective programs that can help the students with learning disabilities to improve on their overall performance (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2002).

With regard to the placement of students with LDs in Saudi Arabia coupled with the contribution of the teachers, there has been the setting up of two types of students' placements (AlZoubi, 2012). Firstly, there is the institutional schooling where the students experiencing learning disabilities have to study in specialized institutes and this largely depend on the nature of the disability. In this model, those students experiencing learning disabilities are isolated from their peers so that they can receive special care as required by their prevailing circumstances. Secondly, there is the "mainstreaming programs" that refer to the special education programs incorporate in the regular schooling system of Saudi Arabia (Al-Zoubi, 2012). These programs include teacherconsultant and itinerant teacher programs and are specifically designed for meeting the diverse needs of those students experiencing intellectual disabilities, which incorporate learning disabilities (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2002). Teachers involved in these two programs are specifically trained to help address the needs of

those learners experiencing learning disabilities and are required to keep themselves informed with emerging techniques and strategies of helping this particular population.

6. Supportive Government Funding

The Australian government has been in the forefront in the implementation of all major laws regarding education. The Australian government has many states and territories that are bound by the law to ensure the delivery and regulation of schooling among all the children regardless of their prevailing circumstances. The largest percentage of school education funding is provided by the government (Thomas & Whitten, 2012). The state and territory governments are responsible for the administration of the schools, the preparation of the school curriculums, as well as the regulation of the school activities. In 2014, it was established that the state and territory governments accounted for 66% of the total school funding all across the country (Benavot, Quan, & Unesco, 2016). This accounts for the funds disbursed to both the regular and special education schools. To ensure transparency, there was the formulation and implementation of the Australian Education Act 2013, which gives an explicit explanation of how the Australian government and private schools should be funded and how they should claim their funding from the commonwealth (Thomas & Whitten, 2012). Apparently, most of the government funding goes to the public schools as compared to the private schools. Most of the special education schools are publicly owned and, hence this demonstrates the zeal of the government to support the education of the learners with special needs including the LDs.

Like Australia, the Saudi Arabian government has recognized the importance of publicly funding the education system including that of the special needs children. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia advocates for equal education for all the citizens on the platform of

four main principles. Firstly, the government advocates for free education for all people all across the country. Secondly, the government targets the enrollment of 99% of all targeted children (Benavot, Quan, & Unesco, 2016). Thirdly, there is a requirement to have equal opportunities for everyone in the country. Finally, the government aims at optimally minimizing the levels of illiteracy in the country. Importantly, the Arabian government oversees the administration of the education system and its aim is; ensuring different students are taught using the most effective methods based on their diverse needs; avoiding the centralization of the learning process; building capabilities; and structuring new quality control mechanisms and motivation processes. All the above factors shows the governments' commitment in the delivery of equal education for all and, according to Mutua and Sunal (2012), the funding of school education is made available with more focus being put on the students experiencing different forms of disabilities.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is apparent that learning disabilities are a critical issues in the society primarily considering that its exposes the students to discrimination and victimization from other quarters of the society including in schools. Education is not only an important component in the life of an individual but it is also considered a basic necessity in some countries. Unfortunately, students suffering from LDs are at times denied equal opportunities relative to their colleagues. It is in this context that different governments and stakeholders should embark on strategies that help promote education among students suffering from LDs. This comparative study undertakes an analysis of the Australia and Saudi Arabia with a focus on three key factors that demonstrate each country's efforts in supporting the education of the above stated population.

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